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ABSTRACT

Teaching via technology, whether using computers, the Internet, television, or video networks, is a growing field that is a Pandora's box of benefits and dangers. A one-way, non-interactive English telecourse combines televised lessons with textbooks and study guides but does not allow students to interrupt in real-time to interact with the teachers, relegating them to the more passive role of observing and responding to the transmitted information. The notion that higher education serves as a gatekeeper for businesses and professions, supervising access to jobs and graduate schools, calls into question the uses of telecourses that teach standard written English functioning as an ideological apparatus of the state, creating in its students consumers of state-authorized information. Among other concerns are: (1) the telecourse often does not provide students with the tools to adequately synthesize the information from the course in writing, nor the consistent group learning that sparks critical thinking; and (2) the telecourse creates a dangerous educational paradigm in which an honored television voice disseminates unchallenged information and graders are left judging the performance of solitary students they have never met. Given that distance education is only going to grow more popular and more complex, these issues and others like them must be addressed. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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ED 410 584

The Ideological and Cultural Implications of the English Telecourse

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My main point is this: teaching via technology--whether using computers, the internet, television, or video networks--is a growing field that is a Pandora's box of benefits and dangers. As Nathaniel Hawthorne reminds us in "Rappaccini's Daughter," science and technology may be used to create beauty, but they may also kill us if mis-used.

I focus on one-way, non-interactive English telecourses--not only because I have created, produced and taught them for a number of years now, and not only because telecourses are used by over 50% of two-year colleges and a significant number of four-year schools--but because television as a cultural industry is an especially powerful conveyor of ideology. A one-way, non-interactive telecourse of the sort that I teach for Pima is a pre-prepared semester-long course that combines televised lessons with text books, study guides, and the like. Some telecourses are prepared in-house like mine and are primarily a talking head with computer graphics and props, disseminating information in the manner of a newscast; others are slick, million-dollar PBS-type documentaries. This is different from a "teleclass," in which a given lecture is taped and transmitted live, in real-time over cable networks to students watching either in other classrooms or at home. A telecourse is also different from an "interactive teleclass" in which students and faculty in classrooms at multiple sights are linked in real-time by some combination of video and audio. In a telecourse, information is transmitted one-way via cable networks or video cassettes; the student cannot interrupt in real-time to interact with the teacher, but is relegated to the more passive role of observing and responding to the transmitted information. The two-hour cablecast sessions of my telecourses are available to every cable-ready home in the Tucson area, reaching roughly 200,000 households for between 20 and 24 hours each week. Thus not only registered students but non-enrolled observers have access to material that is normally contained within the four walls of a college classroom. I don't know how many or how often, but anecdotal evidence suggests that a fair amount of people watch. I have received letters and phone calls from non-enrolled observers, and a waitress once wagged her finger at me, saying, "You're on TV way too much." I would show you a clip, but the convention wanted $45 to rent a vcr an tv, and I thought that was a bit much for 30 seconds of me on tv.

These transfer-level writing telecourses are designed to reach students otherwise unable to take courses. The average student is a parent over thirty years old with at least one job, and over 77% of the writing telecourse students are women. The significant majority are Anglo, which is different from the ethnic classroom make-up at the rest of the College.

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My teaching goal, in addition to helping students achieve higher levels of critical thinking, is to help students achieve the functional writing skills that will enable them to further their personal goals of better jobs and continued education.

For today's paper, I will assume that you are familiar with the notion of higher education serving as a gatekeeper for businesses and professions. That is, as Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer define the community college mission thusly:

> They are among the frontline institutions in the continuing war against illiteracy and irrationality. They defend an American culture, articulate it, filter people into it . . . [and transmit] values and shared understandings. . . . They protect the university by sorting out the prospective students and sending only those who have passed the college-level initiatory rites: the courses, tests, and prescribed modes of conduct. They assist the community's employers by screening their prospective employees. (3)

In this respect, community colleges are not much different from four-year schools that supervise access to jobs and graduate schools. According to this vision, higher education can be seen as an enterprise funded and maintained by the state in order to create a citizenry capable of appropriate intellectual, professional, and civic behavior. But how is that appropriate behavior determined? If you are a good marxist, you will say through ideology.

Althusser defines ideology thusly: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." That is, "in ideology, 'men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form'" (163). In this sense, then, ideology becomes the way we conceive of the world--not necessarily the way the world *really* is, nor a false representation of reality, but the way the world *appears* to us.

According to Louis Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses are "multiple, distinct, 'relatively autonomous'" (149). They are religious (the system of different churches); educational (different schools, public and private); familial; legal (including the juridical establishment); political (including Parties); trade-unions; communications (press, radio, television); cultural (literature, the arts, sports, music). An ISA functions primarily by ideology (that is, by controlling systems of thought) and secondarily by repression (acting as gatekeepers to institutions, for instance, or coercing certain behaviors, such as religious rituals like marriage). ISA's can be seen as a web of power relations, each strand of which embeds in the individual a way of thinking of the world. As Althusser writes, each ISA contributes in the way proper to it:

> the political apparatus by subjecting individuals to the political State ideology . . . the communications apparatus by cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc. by means of the press, the radio, and television. The same goes for the cultural apparatus (the role of sport in chauvinism is of the first importance), etc. 154

If we recall Cohen and Brawer's stated goal of the community college above, we can see how the state apparatuses function. The goal of the community college, they write, is to "defend, ""serve," protect," "sort out," and "screen." These words suggest that the community college (and, by extension, the university) is in some ways "repressive," designed to maintain a social order by limiting access to particular physical spaces, such as classrooms, lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, and the like. By creating and enforcing standards and denying entrance to those who cannot maintain these standards, higher education serves as a repressive apparatus--a "gatekeeper" for the larger communities of business and professional training.

But they also function as an ideological apparatus, defending and articulating a culture, prescribing modes of conduct, warring against illiteracy and irrationality. The telecourse that teaches standard written English functions as an ideological apparatus of the state, creating in its students consumers of state-authorized information.

Standard written English is the dominant language in America, and as such should be problematized. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom asserts that the "dominant majority gave the country a dominant culture with its traditions, its literature, its tastes, its special claim to know and supervise the language" (31). Bloom's point (although certainly open to important critiques) is important, for in our country those who cannot manipulate this language are left outside the portals of the dominant culture. In my role as television teacher of standard written English (or, to put it another way, in my role as agent of various ISA's), I represent the dominant culture: my image on television represents the "special claim to know and supervise the language." As the telecourse teacher, I am not so much the Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff "master craftsperson" moderating a communal pursuit of knowledge in a collaborative classroom (Elbow and Belanoff, 9), as much as I am the Frierian master banker who dictates the terms and standards of appropriate knowledge. The point is not to criticize distance education as being a vehicle for politics, for all education is such a vehicle. The point is to call attention to that vehicle and examine it more closely, for what happens if I as the teacher use this form of ideological apparatus to spread a programmed political agenda? What happens if I use the telecourse as a bully-pulpit, exhorting students to think as I want them to, to write as I want, to act as I want? What happens if I seek to infiltrate the minds of my students, using the combined powers of television, education, and language to advance my opinions, beliefs, and desires? These are important concerns, because this is exactly what the telecourse does.

These questions raise a number of provocative implications that need to be pursued:

1) Studies indicate that the course content of telecourses designed for public viewing and a long shelf life is often more moderate than the content of a similar classroom course. This conflicts with many humanities educators, who see themselves as inquirers into the social constructions of knowledge, a political, communal act. What happens when that political inquiry intersects with the foundational-based televised class that simply disseminates "true knowledge"? For instance, at the Third International

Distance Education Conference last year, the director of marketing for the LeCroy Center, one of the premier producers of telecourses, indicated that their content specialists attempt to avoid controversy by staying with tried and true knowledge. For example, a history telecourse produced by the LeCroy Center avoids current events and other material that could be considered controversial, staying instead with material generally recognized as factual. In other words, because the course material is made public, those who disseminate this material don't take risks with their teaching, staying instead with a moderate program of course content. I am caught in a similar predicament with my own telecourses; to appease department heads, course content is modified and risks that would be taken in a classroom are avoided. For example, instead of trying to teach "the exploratory, contravening essay" (98) advocated by Kurt Spellmeyer, with its "liminal, protean character . . . an ethnographic view of knowledge . . . as the symbolic expression of the various ways humans have contrived to order their day-to-day affairs" (95), the telecourse transmits information on Aristotelian rhetorical modes, a much more traditional, and therefore safer, topic. It seems that education suffers here. If distance education continues to moderate the pursuit of knowledge, my fear is that we will only pursue moderate knowledge, and not take the risks that push our common intellectual horizons. We must guard against that.

2) While telecourse students seem able to gather and reproduce supposedly objective information, the telecourse often does not provide them with the tools to adequately synthesize that information in writing. A report given by the Dallas County Community College District at the same Distance Education conference emphasized that a comparison of student performance and retention rates in telecourse and classroom instruction showed "no significant difference in either achievement or retention rates" (Busby and Alfers, 33). Their study reinforces the 30-odd dissertations and 70-odd ERIC indexed articles on telecourse over the past 25 years in perpetuating a belief that well-made telecourses with appropriate student support can indeed be excellent avenues for allowing students to learn and retain information. However, a closer look at the study raises an as-yet unexplored implication. None of the telecourse students received an "A" in the course, whereas 8% of the classroom students received "A's." In addition, over 45% of telecourse students received either an "F" or a "W", whereas only 26% of the classroom students received "F's" or "W's." Furthermore, telecourse students did not do as well as classroom students in the short essay aspects of the course, an indication that perhaps the telecourse students, while able to gather and reproduce "objective" information, are not able to adequately synthesize that information in writing. Not only does this report indicate the need for greater support systems to enable student retention, but it indicates that telecourse students need to be given more opportunity for critical thinking. I think distance educators need to be especially concerned with promoting critical thinking in courses. In addition, more assessment research is called for.

3) The simple fact is that by its very nature, one-way, non-interactive telecourses will never be places for the consistent group learning that sparks critical thinking. Although the foundational/banking system seems helpful to the type of motivated adult learner who is most likely to sign up for a telecourse, it is important to incorporate aspects of collaborative learning in the writing telecourse. Although computer

conferencing, interactive web pages, email, and other computer technologies may address this concern, it should be recognized that economic constraints may limit these opportunities. New technologies call for new pedagogical paradigms.

4) Television, of course, is fundamentally a medium for advertising. Does a college or university telecourse fall into this category? What ways of life are they advertising? In other words, are telecourses designed to be purely altruistic founts of knowledge, or do they also function as advertisements that increase enrollment--and thus revenues? Given that retention rates are universally low, who benefits from the increased advertising and the decreased retention rates? What economic patterns are developing? How many students are paying multiple registration fees in order to pass a course that by its very nature engenders a high drop-out rate? Does the college or university owe it to the student to make available a make-up class at a reduced registration rate?

5) Considering the extended history of television programs and advertisements marketing themselves to women, what does it mean that over 75% of my telecourse students are women, often working, often mothers, and often single? Telecourses simultaneously enable these women to enter academic and professional communities previously denied them, while at the same time continuing to isolate and marginalize them. It remains to be seen if the gain in student enrollment is equaled by a gain in individual growth, for these students are still left in the domestic sphere, disengaged from the politics and socializing that occurs at a campus.

6) Elizabeth Ellsworth declares that the (dangerous) normative subject, the "ideal rational person," is "European, White, male, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual" (96). Ellsworth's postructuralist feminism repudiates this normative subject and seeks to engage the otherwise disenfranchised, not only by challenging what she considers damaging social constructions, but by providing practical means of altering such constructions. Her description of the normative subject pretty much describes me; her concerns call into question my authority as a television instructor and force me to ask a variety of questions: what authority do I have and whose agenda am I pressing in teaching standard written English? What damaging social constructions, if any, are created or perpetuated by having a normative American subject teach standard written English in an America college? Finally, if, as bell hooks asserts, critical teaching is a counter-hegemonic act, and if I am not fully participating in critical teaching in the Friere/hooks/poststructuralist feminist manner, what hegemonies is my course perpetuating? Finally, what hegemonies should my course pereptuate?

7) The telecourse creates a dangerous educational paradigm in which an honored television voice disseminates unchallenged information and a grader is left judging the performance of solitary students he or she never meets. What will happen to teachers, classrooms, and communities of learners? Not only may human interaction disappear, but such traditional methods as collaborative learning and the Platonic dialogue may soon be replaced by the impersonal television and the seductive computer.

In conclusion, given that distance education, including computer-based and televised English courses, is only going to grow more popular and more complex, we must address these and other issues. We may think some of these technologies are the sweet breath of science, but more theorizing and more research needs to be done. We educators must guard against falling so in love with the lure of technology that we become a twenty-first century Rappaccini, willing to sacrifice our students in the name of progress.

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